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The Church
and
International Peace

A Series of Papers by the Trustees of
THE CHURCH PEACE UNION

VII

Might or Meekness

by

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The Church and International Peace

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Might or Meekness

By Rev. William Pierson Merrill, D.D.

"As for the mighty man, he had the earth."
Job 22:8.
"The meek shall inherit the earth."
Psalm 37:11.

The history of mankind is the story of unceasing strife between ideals. Down through the ages they come in pairs, a positive and a negative, a true and a false, or a good and a better, fighting their way along through the years, the soul of mankind their prize. It is seldom that either side win a decisive victory. After every defeat, the vanquished spring up and begins to fight again. After all there is much that fits the facts of life in the fundamental doctrine of Persian theology,—that life is an eternal conflict between opposing principles, between the darkness and the light.

One can readily trace through the books of the Bible the course of many of these conflicts between ideals. But few of them are more clear or central than is the opposition between the two ideals of *might* and *meekness*. "As for the mighty man, he had the earth." "The meek shall inherit the earth." The results of the one policy and of the other are made clear in the words that follow these two texts. We see the mighty man standing erect, towering triumphant. While widows and fatherless mourn and suffer, he glories in the terror created by his splendid strength. But the meek "delights himself in the abundance of peace," which blesses him and the land which he has inherited.

The two ideals are two strongly contrasting answers to one of the great questions of every man. How can I succeed? What is the real secret and way of victory? What path leads most surely to the things worth while? It is the

great practical question for every man, for every nation, for the whole race.

Naturally the first answer to occur to a man, or to the race, is "might." You must make your way by force. If you want the good things of life, you must be strong enough to take them, and then strong enough to keep them. The ultimate arbiter is force. You may not admire force very much. You may think him a clumsy brute. But you must call him in, and rely on him, or you will fail. It is the mighty man who gets the earth. Life is a fierce struggle, with scant place or pity for weaklings. Let the meek go to the wall, while the strong wrestle and fight out in the open for the mastery which comes ultimately only to the mighty.

It should not be cause for wonder that the Hebrew race developed as its first ideal this of the mighty man. After all these ages of advance, children still love to hear of feats of strength, of wars and victories, and deeds of daring. It is not strange if in the dim days of antiquity Hebrew mothers found their children eager for tales of Samson, the man of amazing might, and of David, the brilliant captain. So, when, urged on by a mysterious silent power in the soul, Hebrew thinkers began to formulate an ideal, a human yet divine figure who should, in the future, bring the golden age, the sum of all blessings, to Israel and the world, it was natural that that figure first appeared "glorious in strength," "travelling in the greatness of his might," clad in radiant armor, holding for a sceptre a rod of iron with which to dash the nations in pieces, a warrior filling the valleys with the dead bodies of his foes, making Israel irresistible in might, and causing all other nations to bow before the chosen race, glad to be the servants of the nation whose Lord was the Mighty One of Jacob.

It is a little difficult for those who have, from earliest childhood, read the Bible in the light of the beauty of Jesus, who, caught by the glory of goodness in His face, have easily transferred all ancient scriptural ideals to the spiritual King and His spiritual Kingdom, it is difficult for us, I

say, to appreciate how much there is in the Old Testament of the "religion of valor," the glorification of might, the deification of power. We read the words, "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah," and we think of the Lamb slain for sinners, His garments dyed with his own blood. We have a right so to use the words, we are reading the deeper mind of the Spirit; but we forget that the men who first read the words, before the Christ-light had come into the world, saw in them the picture of a hero, coming back in triumph from a bloody victory over Edom, the ancient foe of Judah. It is the blood of Israel's enemies that stains his garments. "I trod them in my anger, and trampled them in my wrath," he cries. "And their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my wrath upheld me. And I trod down the peoples in mine anger, and I poured out their lifeblood upon the earth."

The shadow of the mighty man looms large and dark across the Old Testament. True, he is always much more than mighty. He is the champion of the weak, he is the upholder of righteousness; his vengeance falls on the oppressor and the tyrant; he is a noble figure, the incarnation of the might and of the wrath of God. But he is the mighty man, whose appeal is to force as ultimate arbiter. That is the Messiah, the King, the hero, for whom the ancient people of God eagerly looked.

But the wonder of the Old Testament is the appearance there of another ideal, that of the meek. It is not found so early, save in faint suggestion. Moses, mighty master that he was, was greatest, the Hebrews said, in his self-mastery; his noblest praise was as the meekest of men. Yet this ideal of the meek as the greatest, the most heroic, the most desirable of men, did not take definite shape, or grow to where it might seriously dispute with the ideal of the mighty the right to the chief place, until late in Hebrew history. It was when the people of God had been crushed, broken, dragged away from their homeland, their dreams of

empire and wealth and national glory dissipated, that a voice began to make itself heard, as it proclaimed the new ideal, that of the *Servant of the Lord.* In those wonderful chapters found in the latter part of the book of Isaiah there is set before us what we may venture to call the greatest idea that ever came into the mind of man, the thought that the truly great man is not the mighty but the meek, that the real hero is not the King but the Servant, that the noblest work is not to set foot upon men's prostrate bodies, but to put your strong arms under their weakness and lift them up, that the highest ideal is not mightiness, but meekness.

Just as we needed to remind ourselves that the Hebrew ideal of might was not mere ruthlessness, but was ennobled by righteous aims, and high resolves; so we need to remember that meekness is not weakness; that the hero of the latter Isaiah is not a silly, helpless sheep; though he is led as a lamb to the slaughter, he goes thus quietly because of strength and self-control, not through weakness and fear. He is as mighty as the King of the earlier dreams; yes, mightier, for he is strong enough to make his majesty more glorious through humility and sacrifice.

This "Servant of the Lord," who appears as the ideal of the later Hebrew literature, is a servant, but he is not servile. He does not bow before men; he makes men bow before the majesty of goodness. An unfortunate atmosphere has gathered about that word "meek," which makes it far from attractive to a strong man. But there seems to be no other word; we must use it, however, with the perpetual reminder that meekness and masterfulness are not inconsistent; that only a strong man can be truly meek, and only a meek man dare put forth his strength; that the meekness to which we are called in the Bible is not a weakness, but a passion. Only a great-hearted man can afford to be meek. And for such a man meekness is the sure way to mastery. The truly meek man is the man who forgets himself in a passion of surrender to a great ideal.

So appeared in the sacred books of the Hebrews (and

of the Christian world), these two strangely contrasting ideals of the mighty and the meek, the King and the Servant; the two ways of winning, through power and through sacrifice; the two crowns, of splendor and of humility. Each was in the Word of God. The upholder of the one as of the other could appeal to the Bible to support his view And men have always appealed to the Bible in justification of their advocacy of the one view as of the other. The glamour of royalty, of the warrior, of strength that will have its way, has never faded; the old ideal of the mighty man as the Messiah of God has always had its believers.

How the two ideals have struggled in the life of the church! Men have said, If the church of Christ is to have real power over men, it must be placed above kings and emperors and nations by possessing might superior to theirs. Conscientious men they were and are, many of them, these who would make the church great through making it mighty. They find in the Bible promises and prophecies and dreams which seem to justify the belief that the way to success for God's church lies through gaining and asserting might and mastery.

If the church can thus readily be led into the worship of might, into estimating as her true resources wealth and power and fame, can we wonder that that ideal of the mighty man still controls so largely the political and commercial life of the race? Can we wonder if in their hearts many believe that the way to success is through the assertion of might? Is it not possible for one to justify such a conviction by pointing to the Bible and saying, "Here is that very ideal. Granted that the ideal of meekness is here, so is the ideal of might. The Bible is back of me when I say that the way to inherit the earth, the way to be safe and prosperous, the way to win for mankind a better future, is the way of might, righteous, honorable, yet, in the last analysis, victorious because possessing adequate force."

But those who thus defend the religion of might on the ground that it is sanctioned in the Word of God, overlook one

significant and decisive fact, the fact of supreme meaning for all Christians. It is the fact that Jesus chose, definitely, decisively, the one ideal, and rejected, definitely, decisively, the other. And wherever Jesus has chosen, the Christian has no choice.

Can anyone who knows even slightly the life and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth doubt that He chose the ideal of meekness, not that of might? He grew up in the presence of the two great ideals of the Old Testament. He knew His Bible. There in the first part of Isaiah, as in many other places, stood out before Him in brave and noble form, the ideal of the mighty warrior, the hero who should establish peace and justice by force—the king on his war horse. He read of David, and of the Maccabees, of the glorious days of prosperity when these mighty men were in power. He climbed the hills back of Nazareth, and looked out over the plain of Megiddo, where Barak fought with Sisera, where again and again the armies of the Lord had clashed with the hosts of the heathen. Down below flowed the brook Kishon, where Elijah, in grim determination to uphold the right, had slain the four hundred prophets of Baal. As He looked, He saw cohorts of Roman soldiers marching across the plain. He knew well how the men of His nation hated the presence and power of those representatives of the tyranny of Rome, how, in the synagogues and in their private conversations, the men of Israel read with fierce conviction the words in which the Old Testament predicted the coming of a Messiah who should set Israel free from its enemies, and fight out the battle of the Lord. There is no question that the ideal of the mighty man, the Messiah who should be a great king, was very forcibly presented to the mind of the young Jesus, and kept before Him in a thousand ways. Had not His mother, in her early joy that she was to give birth to the Messiah, recalled the promises of One who should "show strength with his arm?" Had not the old priest, in his hymn of praise, given thanks for the coming of One whose mission it should be to bring "salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all that

hate us?" On every hand Jesus saw evidence that this ideal, this hope, of the mighty man filled the expectations of the people.

But there was a Spirit in our Lord which came not from His environment, but directly from God. And reading His Bible for himself—as there is plain evidence that He did—he found there another ideal. Few were thinking or speaking of it in that day. It lay forgotten in the literature of the exile. To us Christians there is no part of the Old Testament which is so definitely Messianic as the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. It is hard for us to realize that men could ever have failed to see that it looked forward to the Ideal Man, the Messiah, the Chosen of the Lord. But no one before Christ came thought of that figure of the suffering and meek Servant of the Lord as a picture of the Messiah. Jewish rabbis debated who this Servant might be. Some saw in him simply a picture of Israel, despised among the nations, yet bearing the secret of the world's salvation in his faith. Others thought that the Servant might be a helper and companion of Messiah when He should come.

But Jesus, the lad in Nazareth, knowing Himself to be the chosen of the Lord, the conviction growing quietly stronger in His heart, looked at the two contrasting ideals of might and meekness and said, "This, not that, is the nobler. This, not that, is what God wants me to fulfill." And He made the choice, irrevocable, uncompromising, to be followed without a shadow of wavering. The Messiah must be the Servant, not the King; He must win His way, and establish God's reign, not by might, nor by power, but by the spirit of meekness and of sacrifice.

Here again let us say to our souls, forcibly and insistently, that the "meekness" and "lowliness" of Jesus was as far as possible from weakness or meanness of spirit. There was leadership in Jesus, finer and stronger mastery of men than Napoleon ever exerted. Meekness is spiritual might. Christ did push his teaching to extremes at times, telling us never to resist evil, and that to the one who smites on the one cheek

we should turn the other also. But we must remember that Christ is always giving us ideals, not rules; and that whenever we stiffen any one of His ideals into a rigid rule, we freeze the life out of it. His ideals are for the long future also, and, while holding them firmly, we must move toward them as we can. There is abundant evidence that He calls His followers to show a temper heroic, stern, indomitable. It is not that He has no use for steel, it is that He has better use for it than as a servant of self-interest and personal or racial passion. There was nothing soft in Christ's meekness. no reluctance to stand unflinchingly for righteousness. He never allowed anyone or anything to hinder or thwart His heroic determination to do the will of God, though all the world stood in the way. His voice is like the sound of a trumpet far oftener than "like bells at evening pealing." He calls us, as Peter says, "by His glory and manliness." Even the command about turning the other cheek is not a counsel of cowardice. He says, in effect, "Give yourself to the will of God so unreservedly, so passionately that you will go on, unmindful of the blows that fall upon you; if a man strikes you, let him hit you again; you cannot afford to stop for little personal quarrels; go on and do the will of God." To be meek as Jesus was demands immeasurably greater strength than any exhibition of mere might.

Dramatically that decision of Jesus to follow meekness rather than might is set before us in the opening of the Gospel story. Baptized as a sign that His mission is begun, He is driven by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted. Conscious of great powers, knowing that He could master men and make them do His bidding, He is shown the kingdoms of the world and their glory, but only to make the final identification of might with Satan rather than with God, and to go down from the mountain to win His way and God's way through suffering and extreme sacrifice. Consistently through life and teaching does our Lord uphold the ideal of meekness, and reject the ideal of might. Out of the very few words He adopts from the Old Testament, incorporating them into His Gospel, He

sets in the place of honor among the Beatitudes this ancient text, "The meek shall inherit the earth." It is impossible for anyone seriously to question the assertion that Jesus definitely and positively ranged Himself on the side of the ideal of meekness as opposed to the ideal of might. He set the seal of God's approval on the Servant, not on the King, as the ideal man. "I am among you as one that serveth." "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them. But it shall not be so among you. But he that would be great among you, let him become your servant." Could there be a more solemn and decisive seal to this truth than that scene where our Lord, "knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He came from God and was going to God," rose and washed the disciples' feet? Once for all in that scene the ideal of the mighty man was disowned, and that of the servant enthroned.

If Christianity means anything practical, then this choice of Jesus makes it obligatory for Christians to choose as He did. Following Him becomes a meaningless phrase unless, when His decision is so clear, we decide to stand with Him.

Yet, my friends, in all the dark mass of un-Christian characteristics of Christian people is there one place where the stinging question of Emerson strikes us with more deserved rebuke, "Every Stoic was a Stoic; but in Christendom where is the Christian?" A strong and wise man who has just returned from Europe, where with keen insight he judged the conditions of life, says that in every nation the chief bulwark of the war party is the church. There are many professing Christians whose real religion is the religion of valor. Many a man, if he should let the faith of his heart come to the light, would echo the words of Nietzsche: "It has been said by them of old time, Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; but I say, Blessed are the valiant, for they shall share Valhalla with gods and heroes." There is strength still in the conviction that the mighty man ought to have the earth, and is surest to get it; that the way to win what is worth having is to be strong and go out and take what you want. Among nations and individuals the faith in might

persists. Of course we have learned courtesy and fairness and much kindliness as the ages have gone on; but after all the supreme arbiter must be power, might. The ideal is to be strong and so to be masterful.

Let us not fall into the error of judging that the guilt of following this ideal of the mighty man rests on any one race or nation. Because the religion of valor, the defense of force, has found its most skilful and relentless exponents in certain German writers, and because so many Americans are convinced that German aggression is the real underlying cause of the present war, it is easy for us to single out that one nation as chief among sinners in the worship of the idol of force, forgetting or ignoring the peace-loving traits of German character, forgetting also the sins of other nations. Whatever we may judge as individuals, we must not, as a body of Christians, let our judgment be directed against any one nation; and that for two reasons—the first is, that our business is not to judge others, but to submit our own lives to judgment; the second is, that if we direct toward our American Christianity all the condemnation it deserves, we shall have little or none for other people. Let us look near home and judge ourselves, asking, Which is our ideal, might or meekness? Which have we chosen, and which do we follow, which do we instil into the minds and hearts of our children, which do we count the truly successful man, the mighty or the meek, the king or the servant, the man who dominates others by his power, or the man who puts his strength into humble helpfulness?

It is a serious question. We are all too apt to deceive ourselves. Professing to follow Jesus, we hold in our hearts a painfully incongruous ideal. We want our children to be like Jesus, but we want them also to be rich and famous, and to be served by others. Cut deep into the heart of many a professing Christian until you have found his ideal and brought it to the light; and there you see a strange compound, with the face of Jesus, but with the mind of Napoleon, an ideal in which the meekness is manner, but the might is

secret master. How many of us actually want ourselves and our children to be, as nearly as possible, *what Jesus really was?* That is a question we must let sink into the heart slowly, to stay there for many days and years, till the pain of it shall drive us to the Great Physician. Far be it from me or from any one man to stand and judge others. We are all in the Confessional. For it is not true that Protestant Churches have no confessional. They have a harder one to face than is found in the Roman Catholic Church. For we know well that we are continually under obligation to tell the truth about ourselves to the Son of Man, and hear what He says to us about our failures.

If we begin to look at present life with the "eyes of the glory of God," must we not admit that the mighty man still bulks large in our ideal as compared with the Servant? We are men of the cross; but it is too often a cross made of two sharp blades of steel, or two heavy cannon, or two bars of gold, to be worn as a decoration, or used to batter or buy our way.

There is need just now that Christians in America should do all that in them lies to see that this country stands before the world committed to the Servant-ideal, rather than to the King-ideal, to meekness rather than to might. In his last message to Congress the President spoke words which glowed with the spirit we should feel and show. We may differ as to his policies, we may disagree as to the need of inquiry into the efficiency of our military and naval defences; good citizens and true Christians do differ as to these matters. But on the supreme issue we must be one with him, in holding that, above all, America must just now manifest moral might, must proclaim and defend her ideals of friendship and peace, and must jealously hold aloof from anything, however innocent, which might jeopardize her reputation for friendliness and confidence toward other nations, and her desire to act as peacemaker when the time comes. Those are right who insist that, if we are to have an army and navy, these departments of government should be kept efficient

and strong, as all departments of government should be. But the supreme need just now, to which all other desires and aims must yield, is that the national spirit and conscience should be set and kept in order for the great task of peace making in which America will have the opportunity to play a great part.

But even more than upon our consciences as Americans would I press upon our consciences as Christians the obligation to follow our Master in choosing the ideal of meekness rather than of might, and of being loyal unto death to that choice. Not the meekness which means weakness, cowardice, tame willingness to submit and be ruled. The Hero of the Cross never calls His followers to such a spirit. To be truly meek, as the Bible uses the word, as Christ was meek, is a hard, and bold, and heroic thing. The choice to which Christ calls us is to have such faith in the supremacy of spirit over force that we shall go unarmed and unafraid against the might of evil, and know that, though the way lead to a cross, it leads at last to victory.

When the war broke out, a band of strong young men in England were sorely perplexed. They belonged to a religious body which believes that war is always wrong. Yet they could not endure to stay at home, while their friends were giving up their lives. At last they organized, sixty or more, for volunteer relief service at the front. They refused to carry arms. But there they are, at the front, exposed to death as are the fighting men, helping the wounded, showing kindness, risking their lives; but definitely committed to the ideal of the servant, not to that of the warrior.

That is an extreme case; but it is one of beauty and power. It is witness-bearing in the very face of the devil and his hosts. What the world needs is more Christians who shall make the great choice which Jesus made, resolving at any cost to follow loyally, in their business, in their hopes and dreams, in their influence all through their life, the ideal of the servant rather than that of the mighty man. When the world, out of its actual experience, learns to define a

Christian as one committed to the ideal of humble, self-sacrificing service, then the world will reverence the Christian church and its Master.

The saddest scene in religious history is that in which we see the Jewish people, under the leadership of their rulers, face to face with the King in the person of Jesus and crying out, "We have no king but Cæsar." Heirs of the promises and prophecies, committed to a Messianic hope which was the hope of the whole world, they turned from the very One Who had come to make those prophecies into facts, and chose the incarnation of the ungodlike. Jesus had chosen to be the Servant, not the King; and they could not choose with Him. The glamour of might, of force, of dominant power dazzled them and they denied the hope for which their fathers had longed and laid down their lives.

God keep His church, this nation, the Christians of this age, from any such choice as that. Cæsar is still mighty; force still dazzles and appeals. We want to be great and powerful, and might seems to be the secret of what we want. God keep us from that awful confession of failure, "We have no king but Cæsar." May we, not only in word and song, but in deed and truth, crown as Lord of all the meek and lowly Son of Man, the great Servant and Friend, whose way was the way of the Cross. In the crisis which is upon us to-day, when war shakes the earth, and religious values are dimmed and confused, and might seems to stalk on its way, crushing beneath its feet the forces of peace and justice and the Christ-spirit, there is one great word which might well be made the motto of the Christian church, of Christian nations, of Christians everywhere, an inscription to keep flying on our banners, a word we cannot hear too often or heed too fully, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts."

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